

Of cloudless climes and starry skies; by reitvelds

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Summary:

The gate may be closed, but Will and Mike are not okay. They both think no-one sees the pain they're in, the scars that won't heal. They're both wrong.

Of cloudless climes and starry skies;

Author's Note:

this started off as 'wouldn't it be cute if mike and will went stargazing' but it went in a...different direction, let's say. please enjoy!

Will Byers couldn't sleep.

He hadn't been able to sleep for a long time, really. Since the Upside Down, at least. The nightmares had plagued him for a year and he thought that once the gate was closed and things went back to normal, that sleep would return to him as well, but it had been months and still his nights were a torment. He lay awake, night after night, staring at the ceiling, at the swirling kaleidoscope patterns his eyes made out of the pitch black, the shifting shapes and fleeting shadows that danced in the gloom. He might drop off for a little while, aching eyes drooping closed and carrying him off into oblivion for an hour or two, but the nightmares would always find him eventually and shake him back into the world, sweating and shaking and choking down screams. He learned fairly quickly that staying awake was the better option. So he spent his nights reading, drawing, sat on the porch swing with the cool night air just sharp enough to keep him conscious, or in the bathroom, repeatedly splashing cold water on his face.

School in his condition was hell. Keeping awake in class was a fine art of subtly pinching himself, strategic eye closing, eye rubbing, yawning. He doodled to keep himself focused, sat at the back of the class so as to not attract attention, away from his friends who would notice his bruised eyes, sallowness, messy hair. He had always been quiet in class anyway, so that wasn't a problem. His friends didn't seem to notice either – maybe they were used to his tired eyes and silence, maybe, like his mom and his brother, they had seen him weak and sickly and troubled so many times that they no longer recognised it. Maybe he just didn't see the concerned glances, the whispers that stopped when he came too close. He drifted, silent and pale, beside his friends and their laughter and their shouts, trying to act okay. But who would notice his suffering any more?

Mike Wheeler noticed.

Of course he did. How could he not? How could he fail to see the exhaustion written across Will's face every day, in his deeply shadowed eyes, his chalky skin? He wanted to say something, but he knew Will would hate it. After everything he'd been through, he just wanted to be left in peace, to live or die, sink or swim, by himself. But the feeling of *wrongness*, of plain and simple disquiet, never left Mike. He found himself having trouble sleeping too; lying awake night after night, with Will's pained and drawn face swimming before his eyes. He wished he could say the right thing, the thing that would bring Will peace and happiness again, but this was real life. There was no spell, no codeword, no action he could take to ease his best friend's pain. Even though the monsters had gone and Hawkins was safe and sound, the consequences were still there, the scars refusing to fade, and Mike could see Will's scars, even if no-one else could.

"Will? Will?" Will's head jerked up from the desk. He rubbed his blurry eyes and looked over at the next desk as Mike slid into the seat. "You okay?"

"Huh?...Yeah, I'm fine."

"...Right." Will didn't like the way Mike was scrutinising him, brown eyes dark and unreadable and brows drawn. He looked away from those intense eyes, examining the desk, the mesmerising swirls of wood. His eyes prickled and ached.

Staying awake seemed even harder with Mike right beside him, watching his every move. Will had hidden his sleepless nights so carefully from everyone, his mom, Jonathan, Dustin and Lucas. Why *now* did Mike seem to be on to him? Every time Will's eyes began to close, he felt dark eyes on him, and struggled back to wakefulness again. When the bell finally, mercifully rang, Will snatched his bag up and practically ran for the door, unable to name what made him so disconcerted by Mike's sudden attentiveness, but fearing it all the same. He didn't need help. He didn't need concern. He could get through this by himself.

Mike watched Will slip away through the throngs of students. Dread and confusion filled him. Will was getting worse and Mike could see

it, see how he looked so sick and fragile, like the slightest touch would shatter him into a thousand pieces. Dustin and Lucas caught up with him, staring after Will as Mike did.

“Is he...okay?” Lucas glanced at Mike.

“He’s been acting really weird,” Mike said grimly, softly. “You noticed?”

“Yeah, a little,” Dustin replied. “But you know he hates talking about that kind of stuff.”

Yeah, he does, Mike thought to himself. But that doesn’t mean I’m not gonna try.

Friday night was D&D night, always. All four boys piled into Mike’s basement with food and drinks enough to feed a small army and played until they finished the campaign or fell asleep where they sat; sometimes El and Max joined them, sometimes not. Tonight, Max was teaching El how to play Streetfighter at the arcade, so it was just the boys. Mike preferred it that way, for tonight at least. It would be easier to catch Will and talk to him with less people around. All night he waited for a chance to get Will alone, but every time an opportunity came up, something else distracted him, and the chance slipped by him.

Eventually, the campaign ended, and by midnight Dustin, Lucas and Will were all asleep; Dustin and Lucas in sleeping bags on the floor, Will on the couch. Mike was planning to sleep in the fort, but as he came out of the bathroom and switched off the light, teeth brushed and face washed, he was stopped short by someone groaning in the darkness. The room was a nightmare of objects looming from the dark to trip Mike over, but he managed to make it to the couch, where Will tossed and turned, soaked with sweat, the cords of his neck standing out like piano wire. Before Mike could wake him, however, he started suddenly, his eyes wide in the darkness.

“Will? Are you okay?”

“M-Mike? Is that you?” Will blinked and rubbed his eyes, still shaking. The room was as dark as his dream, as dark as the heart of

the creature that haunted his nightmares. But Mike's hand was in his, his other hand at Will's shoulder, warm and solid and real. Mike left Will's side for a second, disappearing into the black void, and Will reached out, searching blind and terrified for the comfort of Mike's hand, but then the dim glow of the night-light snapped on and illuminated the room a little. Mike knelt back at Will's side.

"It's okay, I'm here, you're safe..." His murmured words of comfort trailed off as Will buried his face, shaking, into Mike's shoulder, his arms vice-like around him. Mike hugged him back fiercely.

"I'm s-sorry, Mike...I'm sorry," Will sobbed softly. *Sorry I'm such a burden, sorry I can't take care of myself, sorry it's just one thing after another with me...*

"Don't be sorry, there's nothing to be sorry for," Mike said firmly. He pulled back from Will, lifting his chin with a gentle hand. Will blinked the tears from his eyes. "Come on. Let's get out of here." He lifted Will up gently by the shoulders, helping him gain his feet. They stepped over the still-unconscious Dustin and Lucas as they headed to the back door. Mike paused for a second, leaving Will stood in the doorway, and ducked into the fort. When he returned, he was holding Will's boom box by the handle.

The night was cool, clear, but not uncomfortable. Will became suddenly aware of Mike's hand in his, leading him out onto the lawn. The grass was soft, tickling Will's bare feet. The whole world was shaded in black and silver and grey and white, the full moon lending everything an icy glow. Mike lead him to the centre of the lawn, and then sat down, guiding Will down beside him by the hand.

"What are we doing out here?" Will asked.

"Stargazing," Mike replied. His hair was liquid jet, his face as white as bone in the moonlight, freckles starkly dark against his pale skin like inverted constellations. Will felt warm despite the cool night breeze that ruffled his hair with gentle, friendly fingers. "I thought it might help you calm down if you weren't in the dark any more, I guess." He fiddled with the boom box a little, removing one tape in favour of another and pressing play. Will recognised the opening drum and guitar of The Smiths - 'There Is A Light That Never Goes

Out'. One of Will's mixtapes, then.

"Just relax," Mike murmured soothingly, looking back up into Will's eyes, and Will did feel his heartbeat slow, now that he was out of the darkness. "You're safe now." Mike laid down, but Will hesitated, still keeping his torso up on his elbow. Mike propped himself up on his own elbows. "It's okay," he said, sensing the problem immediately. "You don't have to go back to sleep. We can just talk."

Will laid down gingerly on the cool grass. "Talk about what?" he asked, head tilted to look at Mike. Mike turned to look at him.

"Anything. Anything you want. School, D&D, your art....the nightmares, if you want. Or not, if you don't."

"I'm sorry about this. You don't have to worry, I don't want to keep you up..."

"Stop apologising. There's nothing to be sorry for. I'm gonna stay up with you, all night if I have to, I don't care. I want to help you, Will. It's okay to need help."

Will look into Mike's earnest, dark eyes, drawing him in like black holes, and felt tears prick into his own. Mortified, he rubbed them away roughly. "You shouldn't have to keep doing this, though. I just feel like I should have....I don't know, gotten over it by now. Like I'm just doing it for attention."

"But you're not. You've been trying to hide that you're struggling. Don't do that, Will, don't hide yourself away from us. We're your friends, your family. We *want* to know."

"I didn't want to upset you," Will said miserably, quietly. Mike sighed and brushed a hand over Will's shoulder, soft and warm, sending the blood up to Will's face, electric shocks down his spine.

"No offense, man, but it didn't work. You just freaked me out even more. So next time, you're gonna tell me what's up with you, okay?" He smiled softly, and Will watched his long lashes brush his cheeks as he glanced down and the upwards curve of his lips with morbid fascination. Suddenly, Mike's face was too close, too real, and his

breath caught in Will's throat. He turned onto his back. He tried to see the stars, but the constellations turned into Mike's freckles and Will could still feel his body, the heat radiating from his arm laid next to Will's, but he didn't want to move away. He wanted to move closer. "Can you tell me what you dream about?" Mike asked softly, his eyes on the stars as well. When Will glanced over, quick and furtive, he could see the diamond pinpricks reflected in the glassy darkness of his eyes. Their heads were so close, their hair had melded together, soft black waves and straight brown strands indistinguishable in the moonlight. "It's the dreams that keep you awake, right?"

"I don't think they're real," Will started slowly. "I think they're...like what the doctors said before. Post-traumatic stress, or whatever. They go away when I wake up, and they're always the same...I'm in the Upside Down, with...that thing. Like when you found me on the school field that day."

"Is it happening again? Is it coming back?"

"No...they're just bad memories. When I wake up, it's gone, it's not...inside me. Like it was before."

"Bad memories...yeah, I've got those too." Will turned his head to the side. Mike was very still and pale under the moon-glow, eyes still wide and staring at the diamond-scattered sky.

"Like what?" Mike glanced at Will.

"Did I ever tell you about the cliff?" Will shook his head. Mike looked back up at the sky. "Huh, guess I must have forgot. Troy and his mouth-breather friend caught me and Dustin up on the cliffs at the quarry one day when you were gone. We were looking for El. Troy, he...he had a knife. Said he was gonna cut Dustin's teeth out, save him a trip to the dentist." He took a deep breath. Will noticed his fists clenched tight at his sides. "If I didn't jump, that is."

"And you did?"

"Yeah. Hardest thing I've ever done in my life. I still dream about falling, sometimes. Sometimes about...blood."

Will didn't ask him to elaborate. He didn't need to. He remembered the lab, too. Mike let out a sudden, shaky laugh.

"It's okay, though. It's okay. Because they're not real. So we just have to wait, and eventually, they'll go away." Mike turned his head to look at Will. "And until they do, I'm here, okay? You just have to remember that they're not real, and when you wake up, everything'll be fine...and I'll be here." His voice had become very low and soft. Will turned his head to look Mike in the eye, hardly daring to breathe. His face was so close, every detail so clear in the white light, his hot breath warming Will's cheeks. The world was utterly silent and still as Mike leaned a little closer and pressed warm, soft lips to Will's.

They pulled apart, and the world started to turn again. Mike smiled, warming Will down to his bare toes, and wrapped an arm around Will's shoulders. They lay, Will's head resting in the crook of Mike's arm, and they stargazed. Mike pointed out the constellations he knew, a mantra of Latin names that lulled Will into a blissful daze until, at last, he slipped into quiet oblivion.

They woke with the sunrise, wrapped in each other's arms, boom box still quietly playing. Mike roused Will with a gentle tap on his shoulder, unwilling to let his mother catch them outside. They slipped back into the basement where Dustin and Lucas still slept and Will got back onto the couch, Mike into the fort. When the others woke, that was how they found them, with no sign of their midnight stargazing left to give them away.

Sleep came easier after that.

The first few nights, nightmares still came, and Will woke shaking and sweat-soaked. But Mike was just a whispered phone-call away, a few soothing words calmed his racing heartbeat, and he went back to bed instead of the front porch swing, asleep almost as his head hit the pillow. He was getting better, slowly, as the weeks passed. The colour came back into his cheeks, his eyes were no longer sunken and bruised, his mother stopped stealing anxious glances at him.

It was a surprise, then, to wake in the middle of the night once more, almost four weeks after the stargazing. The shrill shriek of the phone

jolted him from the calm, warm void and brought him blinking into the dull gloom of his room, like breaking the surface of water after diving deep, bubbles cascading and obscuring sight, a confusion of colour and sound. Will sat up slowly, rubbing sleep from his eyes. The glow of his clock told him it was seventeen minutes past midnight.

The phone still screamed, piercing the silence of the house. Will walked quickly to the living room and silenced it swiftly, scooping up the receiver and pressing it to his ear.

“Hello?”

“Will?”

“*Mike?*” Why on Earth would Mike be calling him at midnight? “Are you okay?”

It sounded like Mike was sobbing on the other end. Will’s heart lurched. “I – I just – I had a nightmare, and – I just can’t calm down –”

“Okay, okay, shh...it’s okay, Mike. You’re safe now.”

“I’m s-sorry, Will...I’m sorry...”

“Don’t be sorry,” he said, softly and firmly. “I’m gonna come over, okay? Just hold on a little while.”

“N-no, Will, you don’t have to – you don’t have to come, I’m sorry I called you...”

“I’ll be there soon, Mike,” Will insisted, still talking in those calm, firm tones, like Mike talked to him before. “You won’t be alone.” He hung up before Mike could protest further and listened carefully for the sound of his mother or Jonathan stirring. The house was still a soft ocean of silence. He headed back to his room purposefully, dressed quickly, and grabbed his bike. The world was silent, scudding clouds alternatively bathing the town in moonlight or shading it with shadow, street-lights casting golden globes of light over Will’s head. Every house he passed was dark, windows like closed eyes. Mike’s house was dark and quiet too, but Will found the back door unlocked.

The basement was pitch black and a little frightening, shapes that were familiar by day looming threatening over him by night. Will heard the crying as soon as he entered and headed for the fort.

“Hey, Mike? It’s me, it’s Will, I’m here,” he said softly as he stuck his head inside. It was dark in there too, Mike a huddled, sobbing shape in the corner. Will clicked on the night-light and lit the little space up with a soft golden glow of stars projected on the walls, then wrapped his arms around Mike’s back and pulled him close to his chest. Mike relaxed and melted into Will, still crying softly. Will murmured soothingly, anything he could think of to calm Mike down, stroking his hair.

“Do you wanna talk about it?” he whispered. Mike pulled back a little and turned to face Will, eyes swollen and red from crying, lips wobbling.

“It was the lab again,” he whispered. “I was frightened, Will, so fucking frightened...you don’t remember, you wouldn’t, but it was...horrible.” He took a shuddering, gasping breath. “I dreamt about the gunshots, and the screams, and...you, all blank and empty...” Will hugged him closer as he began to cry again. “That was the worst part,” Mike whispered in his ear, so soft Will had to strain to hear him even as his lips brushed the sensitive shell of Will’s ear. “You being...gone. And that...that *thing*...inside you. Talking through you. I thought I’d never talk to *you* again.”

“I’m here now, Mike. And I’m never, *never* going away again.” Mike’s lips tasted of salt, tears turning cool as they slipped over the soft skin, running into Will’s mouth too.

They fell asleep in a tangle of limbs and sheets, with the stars of the night-light flickering over their peaceful faces, tears drying as they held each other.